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ABSTRACT

A senior member of the administration at Filton College (England) who was the internal nominee to the college's Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), recounts his experience of the college inspection process. The FEFC, an agency of the government, funds colleges and ensures that satisfactory arrangements exist to assess the quality of education. The internal nominee is one of a college's senior staff who becomes part of the FEFC inspection team. The internal nominee position was a new idea for the FEFC and is designed to bring colleges more into the inspection process. At Filton the inspection process began in September, 1993 and ended in March, 1994. During that time 13 inspectors visited the college. At times there could be as many as six inspectors at a time on campus causing significant disruption and anxiety. The internal nominee was kept busy soliciting extra material from faculty, coordinating visit details, observing classes himself, preparing various reports and strategic plans, and finally presenting and explaining the findings and resulting actions. The internal nominee can do much to make the process run smoothly even though the nominee does not participate directly in the determination of the college's grades and the position is very time consuming. (JB)

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FEFC inspection and the role of the internal nominee

Malcolm Tipper

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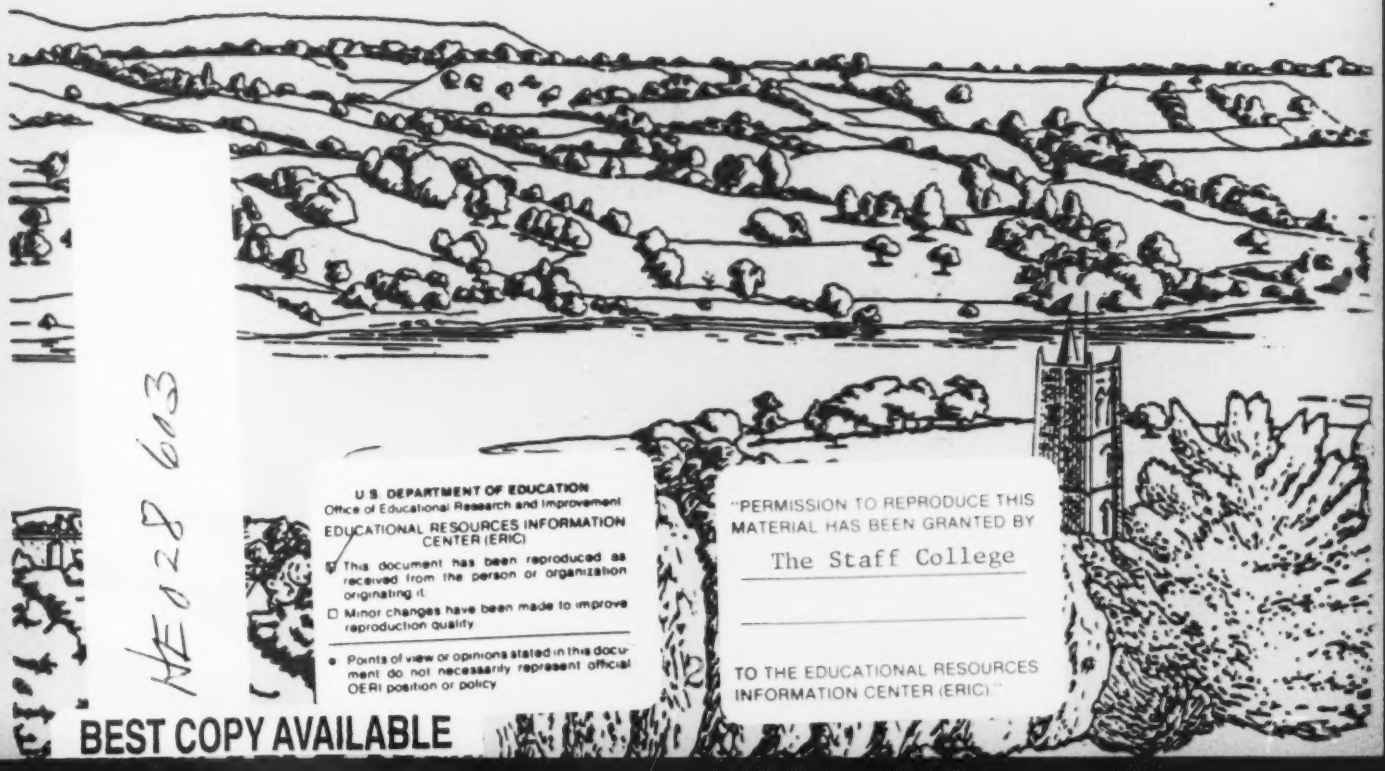

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FEFC inspection and the role of the internal nominee

by Malcolm Tipper

The Staff College

MP 077

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Malcolm Tipper has been employed in further education for 20 years. Following an economics degree from the University of Wales Malcolm attended Huddersfield College of Education (Technical) as it was then and qualified as a teacher. Part-time lecturing in Hull followed by promotion to senior lecturer took him to Eastleigh College of FE where he was also deputy head of the business studies department. The City of Bath College appointed him initially as head of faculty of business and promoted him to assistant principal (marketing). He is now in his second year as vice-principal at Filton College.

Malcolm considers himself a product of FE as the local technical college provided the springboard for his future career by enrolling him on an OND course after academic failure at school. Malcolm has experience of industry through working with the Forestry Commission and British Olivetti. He is currently working towards an MA at the Bath College of Higher Education

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Mendip Papers

FEFC inspection and the role of the internal nominee

Malcolm Tipper

Contents

1 Introduction

1 Background

3 The process

8 Conclusion

9 References

Introduction

From the frying pan into the fire.

I had left the City of Bath College after four years, and just as the acrimonious dispute over contracts was reaching its peak. Waiting for me at Filton College in my first week was the opportunity to be the internal nominee during the first round of FEFC inspections arising out of the incorporation of colleges in 1993. My career in FE began as a part-time lecturer in Hull 20 years ago and took me through the lecturing scales LI, LII, SL, PL, head of faculty and assistant principal to the role of vice principal. Nothing during this period, apart from a very occasional meeting with an HMI, prepared me for this newest of roles.

In this paper I attempt to explain how the inspection process operated from the viewpoint of the internal nominee, a position combining the inspector and the inspected. The paper also provides practical examples of how the process could be made to run smoothly, some things to avoid and a view that the role, if developed effectively, can not only benefit your college but the FE sector in general.

Background

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), a quango with an annual expenditure of £25m, not only funds colleges but also has a duty under Section 9 of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act to ensure that satisfactory arrangements exist to assess the quality of education provided in colleges within the sector.

Three levels of quality assurance were recognised by the FEFC in **Circular 93/28** (FEFC 1993b). They are:

- quality control: the mechanisms within colleges for maintaining and enhancing the quality of provision;
- examinations and validation: the activities of external bodies such as the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, the Business and Technology Education Council, the City and Guilds of London Institute, the Royal Society of Arts and the GCE and GCSE boards which are responsible for guaranteeing the standards of their qualification's external assessment: independent assessment of the quality of teaching and learning in the colleges and of the standards being achieved by the students; and
- external assessment.

The primary responsibili , for quality control rests with colleges. They are also responsible for overseeing assessments and examinations, and for complying with the standards of the validating and examining bodies. The FEFC is responsible for the third level and to achieve this it uses two approaches:

- the use of performance indicators and
- quality assessment based on inspection.

External assessment is also the focus of this paper.

By September 1994 the first tranche of colleges to be inspected was known: Filton College was to be included. In September 1994 Filton College had in place its new senior management team of nine under principal Hilary Cowell. The final appointment to this team was the myself as vice principal (operations and planning) responsible for primarily curriculum and quality. The announcement that Filton College was to be inspected during 1993/94 coincided with this appointment and I was given the role of college nominee for FEFC inspection purposes.

The idea of an internally nominated college inspector was new and its basis came from FEFC consultative **Circular 93/11** (FEFC 1993a). A consultative group, which was responsible for producing this circular, had discussed various ways in which the college being inspected could make a contribution to the council's assessment of quality. One of these ways was 'Colleges nominating a senior member of staff to join the inspection team'.

Responses to **Circular 93/11** totalled 259 and as a result of the consultation process **Circular 93/28** (FEFC 1993b) contained the approved framework for inspectors in the further education sector. Part 7 said 'The suggestion that colleges be invited to nominate a senior member of staff to participate in the inspection process was supported with reservations. In response to these reservations, the role of the internal nominee will be agreed with the principal of the college concerned, and the nominee will not contribute to decisions on quality grades.'

This last part – that the nominee will not contribute to quality grades – was imprecise and the point at which contribution to grading began and ended was difficult to establish.

Colleges were to be graded on a five-point scale against seven areas as follows:

Grades

- Grade 1: provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses;
- Grade 2: provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses;
- Grade 3: provision with a balance of strengths and weaknesses;
- Grade 4: provision in which the weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths;
- Grade 5: provision which has many weaknesses and very few strengths.

Areas of provision:

- responsiveness and range of provision;
- governance and management;
- students' recruitment, guidance and support;
- teaching and promotion of learning;
- students' achievements;

- quality assurance;
- resources.

From January 1994 resources was sub-divided into staff, accommodation and equipment.

Each major predetermined curriculum area was also given a grade based primarily, but not exclusively, on the teaching and promotion of learning and the students' achievements in that curriculum area.

Circular 93/28 (FEFC 1993b) was still in draft form when Filton College was informed that it was to be inspected and the July version was sent to the college for planning purposes. This draft as it related to internal nominee remained identical except for the change from chief executive to principal of the college.

The process

My role of internal nominee began on receipt of the first formal letter from Joanna Gaukrodger of the FEFC to the principal of the college on 25 July 1993, which was passed to me and received mid-August – before I had contractually started at Filton.

The relationship between internal nominee and various types of inspector is worth explaining in more detail. Joanna Gaukrodger had been appointed as the college inspector i.e. the point of contact before, during and after inspection, the inspector who would return to review issues arising out of inspection or unrelated to them. In addition each inspection visit had a lead inspector who managed the inspection process in terms of completing the report, pulling together grading discussions, ensuring the college provided all the information required, and deciding the format of the visit.

Alongside the lead inspector and the principal was a team of inspectors consisting of:

- full-time inspectors, i.e. employed by FEFC for inspection;
- part-time inspectors whose main employment was not with the FEFC but who had specialist knowledge in the education field; and
- lay inspectors, who worked in industry and would bring an objective, non-educational viewpoint to the experience.

To reflect the views of the wider community on the inspection team, whenever possible, at least one of the part-time inspectors would have recent experience outside the world of education.

The inspection process began in September 1993 and was completed in March 1994. During that period 13 inspectors visited the college with a maximum of six in college at any one time. This provided considerable logistical problems for the internal nominee, from the basic car parking and catering problems, to timetable changes, staff sickness, and organising focus groups of employers, students and careers teachers. During the cross-college inspection week five inspectors simultaneously required five interview rooms plus a base room: a tall order in the largest, best equipped college. In reality several senior managers, who were really on call, had to vacate their rooms whilst still effectively performing their job. The concept of 'walking the job' was well practised during this week. The internal nominee bore the brunt of the confusion, anger and pent-up nervousness of those involved in the process and this didn't stop when the inspectors left. Some of the grades awarded, or the weaknesses identified and reported on, rankled for weeks and still do.

One major advantage for the college and for the inspection process was the newness of the internal nominee to the college. I had 19 years of experience in further education but none at Filton College. I therefore had nothing to defend or protect although I wanted to share in the success of my new college. I was uniquely placed: an insider who nevertheless knew little of the college and was able to ask the seemingly naive questions; someone not tainted by the personalities of faculty heads or team leaders. Discussions with other internal nominees who went through inspection at roughly the same time showed that there was considerably more pressure on them. For example, an internal nominee from another college was also the vice principal with a brief for curriculum and quality. He could have been expected to have had influence over range and responsiveness of provision and/

or quality assurance and a poor grade in this area could be seen, rightly or wrongly, as a reflection of his ability – an unwelcome extra pressure. I felt that I could be more objective about Filton College, although I wanted to be associated with a 'good' college. I might be less aggressive in my views of an issue because I did not know the background or the people. The principal had taken a brave step in appointing a 'new boy' who had nothing yet to defend. In reality most of the other internal nominees (myself included) genuinely wanted improvements in further education, in the classroom, from the point of view of both teaching and equipment and the strategic management and direction the colleges were taking, and therefore welcomed the inspection process, albeit guardedly, and the unique role afforded to them.

The inspection role was upon me before I had absorbed fully what the role of internal nominee was. The published information was sparse, the inspectors were newly appointed and learning their briefs; the precise role of the internal nominee during team inspections was to be agreed with the principal of the college. In principle the nominee would be able to participate in all aspects of the inspection but would not contribute to decisions on quality grades.

On 6 September 1993, three working days after my official start at Filton, the inspection process started with the arrival of two inspectors to review the enrolment process and full-time induction. They returned a week later, again to look at induction, with these observations forming part of the inspection of student recruitment, guidance and support. During this second week my role as internal nominee was described as 'to act as an inspector but not to be part of the grading decision-making or to undertake classroom observation'. This subsequently changed and I did get involved in some classroom observation, completing the yellow NOV (Note of Observation form). I was also informed of the need for an annual college quality report (although this was not required in the first year) and that there would be a briefing day for college nominees to be held in Coventry – better late than never.

By mid-September the shape of forthcoming events was known. Inspections of individual curriculum areas would be spread over eight to 11 days during the three weeks either side of Christmas 1993 and the cross-college inspection week would be during March 1994. The problems associated with visiting a college in the last week of term before Christmas were pointed out and subsequently this week was not used. The FEFC also started referring to the curriculum inspection as 'drip feed', contributing to the full or team inspection in March.

Towards the end of September I and the rest of the college started to appreciate not only the amount of paper required by this exercise, but also that it was required in a 'user-friendly' format for the inspectors as opposed to the statistical requirements of the DFE. Some of the information required (enrolments and examination results for the last three years, for example) meant a tremendous amount of work producing readable, comparable data from different sources. Staffing details were held by personnel and by faculty heads in different formats and another major collating exercise was needed.

This information collection was a test of my management skills, convincing lecturers to provide 'irrelevant' information is hard enough, but in these sorts of quantities and in different formats, it was a very difficult task. The issue of new contracts for FE lecturers was very prominent at the time and my former college only 13 miles away in Bath was creating local and national headlines about 'draconian' changes. This was not a good time to ask staff for extra information over and above the normal requirements. Eventually compromises over the extent and detail were made. Some inspectors were new to FE and perhaps hadn't grasped the complexity in comparison to a school. The college nominee played a vital role here, diffusing the irritation of the staff by collecting what was reasonable, and by negotiating with the inspectorate what was essential and what could either wait or be received in a modified, readily available format.

The next stage involved a briefing day in Coventry (FEFC headquarters), attended by internal nominees from colleges all over the country.

I returned from this briefing day with very little new information to work on. The FEFC considered the benefits of the internal nominee to be openness, efficiency and staff development which I think is a fair reflection. It certainly made the inspection process more open than ever before; it certainly, from the inspectors' point of view, made the exercise more efficient as they had a single point

of contact, and for the internal nominee it certainly was an extremely useful staff development role – especially for someone so new to the college. It opened up areas of college life I may not have seen initially.

By the end of October the college nominee and lead inspector had agreed the arrangements for the specialist visits and these were subsequently agreed by the principal and chair of governors. Ten curriculum areas were to be graded involving 11 inspectors (excluding the internal nominee). This became a complex and protracted task in two or three instances. For example, performing arts was to be graded under art and design (it is part of the same team at Filton College). The art and design expert was a different inspector to the one looking at performing arts and they visited the college at different times.

As internal nominee I organised the process of specialist visits by providing timetable information which the inspectors then used at random, attempting to see all full-time staff and all levels of the curriculum. This was not helped by one area deciding to hold mock exams during the week the inspector was in – another delicate diplomatic task for the internal nominee. On the one hand, staff had been told not to disrupt their normal planned work (mock exams fell in this week but nobody had informed either me or the other inspectors). On the other hand, the inspectors had to assure themselves that teaching and the promotion of learning was going on. In the event a compromise was struck. Teaching did go on and the inspector saw enough to give a realistic grade. However, without the intermediacy of the internal nominee, a real problem would have been unresolved.

The first week of specialist visits, the penultimate week of the autumn term, saw six inspectors looking at six specialist areas. In the second week of the winter term the remaining specialist visits were completed. Verbal feedback was given in two stages after each specialist area had been completed. The first feedback was given by one inspector, even though two may have been involved, to the faculty head and the appropriate team leader. Occasionally another member of staff closely involved in the area would be present. The second feedback was by the same inspector to the principalship, which included the internal nominee, the vice principal for resources and the principal herself. These feedback sessions sometimes started with the grade and then explanations as to what brought this grade about or sometimes the explanations first, culminating in the grade. The former was far more acceptable and became the standard format. The process was somewhat arcane in that it involved three, usually senior, staff scribbling furiously the points raised by the inspectors. At one point I asked to use a recorder to save energy and confusion but was refused with the explanation that it would distort the ambience or flavour and would lead inspectors to be far more formal in their feedback. I didn't accept this then and I still don't.

The roles of the internal nominee during these specialist visits were several. Firstly, as an inspector I took the opportunity of observing classes, initially with the lead inspector and then on my own in an area in which I was a specialist (economics). I stuck to the established format for such observations, i.e. a maximum of 45 minutes, talk to the students and look at student files, registers, records of work, lesson plans. The inspectors' base room was already full of marked pieces of work representing a cross-section of a particular subject area. The inspectors had a clear brief, it seemed, that lecturers should have a current syllabus, a plan (scheme) of work, a record of work (what had actually happened), an assignment/homework schedule and lesson plans. This reinforced the already apparent importance that paper evidence had for the inspection.

The contrast in styles between the three types of inspectors was quite marked. The former HMIs were less open with their reactions to what they had seen, rarely asking the internal nominee for a view or explanation. The 'new' FEFC inspectors on the other hand, would discuss their experiences blow by blow, seeking confirmation or further explanation from the internal nominee. In between these two extremes were the part-time inspectors, current FE staff with whom the uneasiest of relationships existed, in particular their reluctance to share good ideas for new schemes or courses with colleges who were potential competitors.

I found the most disconcerting position for the internal nominee was with the FEFC full-time inspectors who after a few visits, would imply, 'well it looks like it could be a grade 4'. (In the event, the college didn't get any grade 4s.) Several questions then arose. Should I alert the principal,

rush around in the remaining hours to alert the staff in the area to pull out all the stops to raise the grade, start arguing aggressively with the inspector that he/she is totally wrong or should I listen, comment constructively, and point out known weaknesses or strengths? I took the last course of action and as the inspectors saw the full picture, their grading position varied. But it was a genuine attempt by the inspectors to involve the internal nominee in the process leading up to the actual grade, and it gave the me the opportunity to point out any areas not observed which could improve the grade or confirm that this was an area which we needed to work on. The inspectors were quite willing to consider the direction in which the college was heading as well as the evidence of a particular point in time and if a problem area had been identified and steps were clearly being taken, this affected the grading positively.

At the end of the specialist week we knew the provisional grades and except in one area there was general satisfaction. In a letter from the lead inspector on 12 February 1994 a document spelling out the main conclusions and issues arising from the specialist inspections was enclosed. He said in the letter 'I would like you to have a look at it in your role as college representative, and check for accuracies, in case any amendments need to be made.' The area of dissent was to become a running sore and one that was repeatedly revisited when the inspectors came again. The FEFC version and summary of provisional specialist grades appeared fairly quickly after the last visit and compared to the copious notes taken by various college staff was short – just one side of A4 registering achievements and points for further attention. For the teaching staff the worst was over but for the managers their close scrutiny was a matter of weeks away. The preparation for the cross-college week was a much more demanding exercise. The five areas to be inspected during cross-college week were:

- responsiveness and range of provision;
- governance and management;
- students' recruitment, guidance and support;
- quality assurance;
- resources.

The letter from the lead inspector spelled out the responsibilities of each of the six inspectors during the cross-college week. Each area was assigned an inspector. Quality assurance involved an inspector who was new to the college. Likewise, inspections in the area of resources were to be assisted by an inspector unfamiliar with the college.

Preparation for cross-college week had been going on concurrently with those for the specialist inspections, and the college had known since September when this would take place.

A major difference between specialist inspectors and cross-college inspections was that the internal nominee organised the schedule of meetings for the cross-college week, whereas during the specialist visits the inspectors determined what and when to visit.

Each area for inspection had a summary of required documentation and a list of meetings. Although the inspectors were involved for five days, Monday was a briefing day, Thursday was to be kept clear for extra meetings and Friday was a report back day. Effectively two days were available for meetings. In total 55 separate meetings were arranged on these two days involving the six inspectors. Meetings started at 9.00 in the morning and some did not finish until 7.30 in the evening. Arranging for a wide variety of full-time staff to be available during these two days presented some logistical problems but there was also the request (demand) for 'focus groups' of various interested parties e.g. members of the corporation, employers, students, parents, school liaison reps, lecturers, support staff, HE liaison representatives and a community focus group. This involved a considerable amount of writing, planning and co-ordinating to arrange. In the end the inspectors saw 13 focus groups. Meetings took an average 45 minutes and 15 minutes was left between each meeting. I took the decision that the most senior manager responsible for the areas to be inspected would be seen first, e.g. the vice principal (finance and resources) would see the inspector for resources first, the principal would see the inspector looking at governance and management first and so on. This would set the scene which the inspectors could verify when they spoke to other staff and groups about the same issues. In effect the whole senior management team was interviewed by each inspector.

In addition to the meetings I had produced a file of material under each main heading. By taking each bullet point listed under each of the five headings in **Circular 93/28** (FEFC 1993b) and producing evidence to illustrate these, a comprehensive document was produced. These five files plus an additional eight major resource files provided the basis of the documentary evidence for the week. Four of the inspectors had already spent time in the college and had gathered information and drawn conclusions.

Establishing a meetings programme and creating a database of documentary evidence took an enormous amount of time. Gaps in written evidence had to be filled with specially prepared papers to illustrate the college's involvement in particular areas.

Briefing staff for this week was in theory more straightforward as it was the senior staff who were under the spotlight; 24 of the 55 meetings involved the SMT. In practice the inspectors wanted to see a number of support staff who would have been largely unaware of previous inspection processes as they were exclusively curriculum-based and were curious as to what the process would involve and why they had been chosen. Reassuring these staff was an important part of my role.

On 8 March six days before the cross-college week began I had a final briefing meeting with the lead inspector prior to addressing the senior management team on last minute arrangements. We agreed the programme and agreed that the principal and the two vice principals (i.e. my colleague and I) would introduce each of the five main areas to all the inspectors on the Monday afternoon of the inspection week. This was to take place at a nearby hotel they were using as a base. My roles as college manager and internal nominee began to fuse from this first Monday. I joined the inspectors as an inspector at lunchtime on Monday and took part in discussions about the week. When the principal and the other vice principal arrived I reverted to vice principal (operations and planning) and presented to the inspectors as a college manager. After the presentations I reverted to internal nominee again and was on hand to guide the inspectors through the documentation assembled at the hotel. I stayed for dinner and overnight on the Monday and was 'on call' until after 11pm as the inspectors got to grips with the documentation and meetings schedule.

During the Tuesday and Wednesday I spent very little time as the internal nominee as I was being interviewed as a senior manager. My role as internal nominee amounted more or less to ensuring that meetings were taking place, focus groups were assembling and any calls for additional documentation were met. The inspectors didn't meet as a group until the evening at the hotel and I wasn't involved in these discussions. The role had changed significantly from the visits by the specialist inspectors where I had felt part of a team and involved in all aspects prior to the award of the grade. In the cross-college week I was being inspected and my role as internal nominee was reduced to facilitator and administrator. Despite the original plan to keep Thursday relatively free it actually involved a wholesale scheduling of 17 additional meetings. The inspectors had discovered that there were key people they hadn't seen, or they wanted to revisit some staff or felt it politic to see some senior managers whom they hadn't interviewed already.

By Thursday evening I had some inkling of possible grades but nothing like the confidence I felt in the likely grades following the specialist visits. The senior management team, all of whom had given up their offices for two or three days, were particularly drained. The principal had to wait for me to relay the grades to her as I was party to the discussions leading up to the grades on the Friday. This meeting was particularly interesting as the interplay between inspectors was most evident. Their areas overlapped to a considerable extent and the inspectors had asked questions amongst themselves to elicit information. Most of the inspectors had visited during the specialist weeks and had built up a view already. The final distillation of grades was very thorough, each inspector presenting the findings and allocating the grade. This was subject to quite severe questioning, especially in the area where the college was awarded a grade 1 (Provision which has many strengths and very few weaknesses) – an immense relief for me.

The next stage was the final feedback by the lead inspector to the principalship. There was furious scribbling by the three senior managers during this session, concentrating naturally on the points requiring attention. It wasn't until some weeks later that we managed to get a record of the positive points.

We now knew the worst and could expect that within six weeks the final report would appear and be available to other colleges, local and national media, local MPs, LEAs, etc. Compulsive reading of other college reports as they appeared had been a regular occupation of the principalship during the run up to our own report.

Prior to the final published report each specialist area had produced an action plan based upon the inspection. Now it was the turn of the internal nominee to produce a cross-college action plan based upon each of the five areas inspected during the cross-college week. This incidentally was a requirement for the stage 2 strategic plan which was due to be with the FEFC by 31 July 1994. Most of the work in preparing the strategic plan fell to me as vice principal operations and planning.

My work as internal nominee did not end with the departure of the inspectors. Two tasks still remained. The first was to produce an evaluation of the inspection process from the college's point of view. This was based on a questionnaire. The overall evaluation was negative, reflecting the early days of the inspection. However, my close involvement with the process led me to be less critical – of course, the art of diplomacy is a key attribute for an internal nominee!

The other task was to check through draft versions of the final report, firstly from the lead inspector and then the final version produced at the Coventry headquarters.

Although the role of internal nominee had officially ended as far as the FEFC was concerned, the position did lead to additional tasks internally. These consisted of presentations and explanations of the findings and resulting action to the corporation, academic board and staff meetings.

Conclusion

The inspection process is not new to FE colleges. However, in 19 years I had not been involved in a full college inspection although I had previously met and been interviewed by Her Majesty's Inspectors about parts of college provision for which I was responsible. My reactions to these experiences were usually negative as it felt like a catching out exercise, a one way traffic of views with no analysis of shared activities proffered by the inspectors. This experience coloured my judgement at first. However, the reality was very different; a genuine move by the FEFC to open up the inspection process by directly involving a senior college manager, despite reservations expressed when the idea was the idea launched in **Circular 93/11** (FEFC 1993a). The FEFC inspectors came from a variety of backgrounds, most had experienced FE but not inspection. The former HMIs had inspection experience but not necessarily further education experience. Surprisingly, a team ethos quickly developed despite only meeting together for the first time on the first day of inspection at college. Genuine attempts by all inspectors were made to embrace the FEFC criteria of openness.

The role of the internal nominee was in theory to be determined by the principal of the college with the only proviso being that the nominee would not contribute to decisions on quality grades. Although pilot inspections at Dunstable and Aylesbury had taken place, none of the Filton inspectors had been involved and neither the lead inspector nor the principal had any firm views on what role I should play. In reality the role evolved and was distinct during the two phases of inspection. The first phase of specialist (curriculum) or 'drip feed visits' saw the internal nominee, in addition to administering the inspection on behalf of the college, become a full team member, contributing to discussions leading up to the grade and being involved in classroom observation. This latter part reinforced my experience that the good lecturers are superb and the worst were naive and arrogant, by failing to prepare lessons, or have schemes of work and records of previous lessons available despite the likelihood of being visited by an inspector.

The second phase of inspection, the cross-college week, led to greater isolation for me. I did see individual inspectors for short periods but not the whole team except at the very beginning and very end. I felt less involved than in earlier visits and my dual role of manager and inspector was much more clearly pronounced.

The combined visits reinforced the belief in my ability to manage all levels of staff in further education and to be able to communicate complex findings to a variety of audiences. The major learning process concerned understanding the

FEFC intentions through the inspection process. It represented a genuine attempt to share the strengths and constructively to outline areas for development. The term weakness was rarely, if ever, used and credit was given if evidence could be produced to show that the college was moving in a particular direction; in the past a penalty would have been involved for not actually being there.

The reliance on documentary evidence was reinforced, a message difficult to convey to teachers who in some cases still consider lecturing to be an unscripted, impromptu performance. I was able to discover areas of the college I would not necessarily have close involvement with, in particular resource allocation and personnel issues.

I was readily accepted by the inspectors as someone who was open and frank, not aggressive, and someone they could work with. I certainly believe that the role of internal nominee can make the inspection process run smoothly. However, an obstructive senior manager could cause severe problems.

The whole inspection process was evolving and several of my senior colleagues were more aggrieved by the process, perhaps because they were at arms length from it and could expect to be held more responsible than me. An example of the evolving nature of the inspection process was the FEFC decision, part way through the inspection process, to change from a single grading for resources to three grades: (i) accommodation, (ii) staffing, and (iii) equipment.

The internal nominee and grading was a grey area. I certainly contributed to discussions and was consulted by most of the inspectors, who would use my comments to confirm or lead them to further investigation, but I was never involved in the direct question of 'I think I will give grade X. What do you think?' The grades were strictly the remit of the inspectors.

Reporting back grades illustrated the dichotomy between new and old technology. As recipients of feedback we had to write everything down, being unable to use recording equipment. At the same time most of the inspectors had entered this same information directly onto a lap top. There was no opportunity to discuss the grade but considerable debate went on over the issues which led to a grade.

From the copious notes and written evidence I had managed to gain an extensive insight into my new college which, without inspection, would have taken me a lot longer. I developed working relationships much more quickly and was accepted as part of the college easily. On the negative side it did detract from my 'proper' job as the whole exercise was incredibly time consuming. It must be remembered that the internal nominee has his/her own job to do simultaneously with the inspection.

A major positive outcome of the process was the requirement to produce action plans arising from inspection. The college now has a series of planning tools for the college as a whole, for separate curriculum areas and for individuals; these provide a clear strategic direction for the next few years.

Now the process has run for a year, a much clearer picture of what is required and how is the best way to organise an inspection will emerge. Possibly a more definitive version of the role of internal nominee will occur, but the need for the role is clear. It provides a clear channel between college staff and inspectors and allows the process to be open and efficient. It certainly played a major part in my staff development.

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